

THE

# HISTORIAN

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi

JUNE 2006

## JUNE HAPPENINGS

The June monthly luncheon meeting will be held at the Lobrano House at 12 noon on Thursday, June 15.

The speaker for this meeting will be Mr. Chuck Benvenuti. Please call ahead for reservations as the seating is limited and plans have to be made. The cost of the lunch is \$7.00 payable at the door.

Restoration on the Lobrano House has begun to repair damages incurred by Katrina. This includes leveling the parlor nearly three inches on the north side. The north wall blew completely out of the building during the storm.

The temporary roof so generously installed by the 110 Civil Engineering Squadron of the Michigan Air National Guard of Battle Creek, Michigan has been replaced by Richard's Home Maintenance & Arthur R. Reeder's Fence Co., of Wiggins, Ms.

### NEW MEMBERS

Yvonne Viguerie

Bay St. Louis

Margaret J. Williamson

Diamondhead

**RESTORATION ON THE LOBRANO HOUSE HAS BEGUN**

## FORMATION OF HANCOCK COUNTY

**The History of Hancock County, compiled by the Works Progress Administration: Published in co-operation with The Hancock County Chamber of Commerce**

West Florida came into the possession of the United States in 1810, and the Mississippi coast was quickly divided into two districts, of which the

western, known as "Viloxie" included the territory between the Bay of Biloxi and Pearl River and between the thirty-first parallel and the Gulf of Mexico. On December 14, 1812 this section was formed into a county named Hancock, after John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress. The boundary is stated as follows in the act of the territorial legislature: "All that tract of country lying south of the thirty-first degree of north latitude, and west of the line running due north from the

THE

**HISTORIAN**

OF HANCOCK COUNTY

**Editor - Dale St.Amant**

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**LOBRANO HOUSE  
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 10:00AM — 3:00PM

Closed from 12:00—1:00.

**MISSION STATEMENT**

"TO PRESERVE THE GENERAL AND ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF HANCOCK COUNTY AND TO PRESERVE THE KATE LOBRANO HOUSE AND COLLECTIONS THEREIN; TO RESEARCH AND INTERPRET LIFE IN HANCOCK COUNTY; AND TO ENCOURAGE AN APPRECIATION OF AND INTEREST IN HISTORICAL PRESERVATION."

middle of the Bay of Biloxi to the first degree of north latitude and east of the Pearl River shall compose a county and shall be known by the name of Hancock."

The original extent has been reduced by subsequent acts of the state legislature to approximately one-fourth of the area stated. The present counties of Harrison, Stone and Pearl River have all been carved out of the old district.

There were a number of acts redefining the line between Hancock and Jackson counties, evidently to reconcile the county boundaries with the survey made after 1812; but these changes were mainly technical in character of very minor significance.

Harrison county was the first to be separated from Hancock. On February 5, 1841 an act of the state legislature created the county. ...the said county hereby created shall be called the county of Harrison.

The larger part of this territory was taken from Hancock county, of which was the richest part, including the cities of Biloxi and the future Gulfport. Stone county was later created out of the northern part of Harrison.

By an act of the state legislature passed February 22, 1890, the northern part of Hancock was cut off to form Pearl River county. The act specifies the boundaries, which are very irregular, especially on the north, where the line is never more than one mile from the thirty-first of north latitude, but on that line for only about half

the distance. The line separating the new county from Hancock, ... was originally from the southeast corner of township 4, south, range 14 west to Pearl River.

By an act effective March 18, 1908, an election was held on May 14, 1908 by which another part of Hancock was given to Pearl River county. This leaves the repeatedly diminished territory within boundaries legally describes as follows: "Beginning at the SE corner of township 4, south, range 14 west, and thence west to the SE corner of township 4 south, range 16 west; thence south on the range line nine miles to the SE corner of section 132, township 6, south, of range 16 west; thence west to the NE corner of section 21, township 6, south, of range 16 west; thence south along range line between range 16 and range 17 to the SE corner of section 1, township 7, south, of range 17, west; thence west to Pearl River; thence down said river by the middle thereof to the most eastern junction of said river with Lake Borgne and thence south to the southern boundary of the state; thence eastwardly with said boundary, including all islands within six leagues of the shores of the Gulf of Mexico and Lake Borgne to a point due south of the entrance of the Bay St. Louis; thence north to the middle of said entrance; thence northward along the middle of the Bay St. Louis to the range line between ranges 14 and 14 (sic); thence north along said range line to the point of beginning."

The present county is irregularly oblong in shape, its greatest length being north and

south. It contains 469 square miles, and has a population, by the census of 1930, of 8,427 white persons and 2,988 Negroes and others, a total of 11,415. The total assessed valuation of property in the county in the same year was \$4,582,392.00.

The act organizing the county specifies no county seat. It was provided by an act passed February 2, 1825, that sessions of the county courts be held part of the year in Bay St. Louis and part of the year in Pearlinton, and that the use of either jail for the confinement of prisoners was left to the discretion of the sheriff. Court was also held two or three years at a place called Center, somewhere near the present Caesar.

### CENTER

Thigpen as quoted in *Louisiana's Loss, Mississippi's Gain*, tells us that Steven Jarrell, a Frenchman, discovered a Choctaw settlement, on a bluff which today is in the northwest part of Picayune. This settlement, called Hobolochito, was named after the distinguished Chief Hobolo, to whose name was added "chito," the Muskogean word for stream. Thus, the meaning of the name was "Hobolo's stream." Jarrell established a trading post there. About 1800, he bought the land on which the village stood, from Chief Muchihira, who had succeeded Hobolo.

After the sale of his land at Hobolochito, Chief Muchihira and his band moved to a village located in the fork between Catahoula Creek and Playground Branch. This community was lo-

cated "on a beautiful sloping hummock by which runs clear sparkling Catahoula creek on the east side, and Playground branch, an ever-running little stream of clear cool water, on the west side...The land there is a rich sandy loam underlaid (sic) with red clay gently sloping toward the streams, with perfect drainage."

The Indian name for this community was a Muskogean word meaning "coming together" or "where everybody meets." White settlers referred to it by a corresponding word. They called it "Center."

Later the town of Gainesville, on the Pearl River, then a shipping point of some importance, now a neglected little village, was made the county seat, but the time is uncertain. Information that has not yet been verified fixes the date at 1846. Fire destroyed the courthouse on April 1, 1853, and the county seat was subsequently moved to Bay St. Louis. In addition to losses by fire, some of the county records are said to have been destroyed by Federal troops in 1863. Whether this was at Gainesville or Bay St. Louis is uncertain.

Bay St. Louis was discovered by Bienville on the day of St. Louis in 1699, but the country was not occupied for many years afterwards, except by hunters and, possibly, a few miserably poor and ignorant squatters. The eighteenth century is almost a blank. In the 1780's we begin to get traces of land grants which indicate that permanent settlements were being made. Among the grantees several names seem to be especially prominent. Simon Favre was the

progenitor of a large family of descendants. Noel Jourdan gave his name to the river. Ambrose Gaines and Thomas Shields are remembered by Gainesville and Shieldsborough, the latter applied to Bay St. Louis and to the customs port. John B. Saucier is also remembered and has left many descendants.

### COUNTY SEATS

When West Florida came into the possession of the United States the part now belonging to Mississippi was divided into two districts, or parishes, Biloxi and Pascagoula, the former extending from the Bay of Biloxi to the Pearl River. Captain and Dr. William Flood, of New Orleans, was sent to organize them. On the Pearl River Simon Favre, who held one of the earliest land grants in the county, and who is described as "an educated and prosperous planter on the eastern bank of the Pearl River," was designated as Justice of the Peace and given a set of the civil code of the territory and of the laws and act of the legislature. A similar commission and set of books were also given to Philip Saucier, at Bay St. Louis, who also had a very early land grant.

Dr. Flood was unable to find anybody at the "Bay of Viloxi" who could read and write, so he appointed Jacques L'Adner, in spite of his illiteracy, and also left him a set of books.

The next year, 1812, the district south of the 31st parallel between Pearl River and the Bay of Biloxi was made the County of Hancock. The early records (as mentioned previously) were de-

stroyed by fire, so that oral information cannot be confirmed by legal records in this county. It is stated and believed, that sessions of the court were held during one-half of the year at Pearlington, and during the other half at Bay St. Louis. In view of the difficulties of travel this arrangement was obviously a great convenience to litigants. No information can be had of sessions at or near Biloxi.

On April 1, 1853, the courthouse at Gainesville burned with the county and court records. The fire, eighty-two years ago, occurred so long before the memories of the oldest inhabitants begin, that the early history of the county is almost a blank, except as date is preserved in state and national records. Certain deeds to property were brought back after the fire for re-recording, but the information obtainable from these is very incomplete and partial.

On October 17, 1838, R. R. Pray and Saria L. Pray deeded to the county of Hancock for the erection of a courthouse the lots of ground in the village of Shieldsborough on which the county court house now stands. This gift of land, more than a generation before the county seat was moved, is interesting as it evidences a campaign, even in those early days, for the change subsequently made.

During the war of 1861-65 Gainesville, as well as the whole shore, was subject to raids by Federal troops who occupied New Orleans, and also had a base on Ship Island. There were also disorders of a serious kind

by "jay-hawkers, who took advantage of the disturbed times and of the absence of almost all able-bodied men in the army to perpetrate many outrages"; but all evidence of their activities has been carefully destroyed.

Of Federal raids there are only tantalizing suggestions. For the session of the Board of Police Court, the governing body of the county, on July 4th, 1864, the following entry appears: "Ordered by the Board that the sum of fifteen Dollars be allowed Thomas P. Moore for saving the Minute of the Probate Court of said County from the Yankee, and that a warrant issue:

The minutes show monthly meetings through 1863 and 1864 until April 3rd, 1865. These are kept in a small book which had been intended for some other purpose, but the first pages of the book were fastened together and the balance used by the secretary. The records are very scanty, giving only hints of the exciting time. On January 2nd, the minutes show that the meeting was begun and held at the Court House of said county in the Town of Gainesville. By March this had evidently become impracticable for a minute worth quoting on account of its quaint phraseology read as follows:

"At a regular term of the Police court of Hancock County begun and held at Jourdan's Smith School House on the 1st Monday, the 6th day of March, A..D. 1865, in accordance with an order of said board at the January term A.D. in 1865, in these words and figures to wit, ordered by the board that the Board meet at Smith's school house in future."

Another minute at the March

session orders the board back to Gainesville. There was a meeting on April 3rd and then no more until August 7th, which was limited to appointing road overseers and fixing the county treasurer's bond at \$5, 000.00. A sheet is torn out of the book. Then came the minutes of a meeting held October 16th. In this appears the following: "Ordered by the Board that G. H. Noble be hereby allowed the sum of twenty dollars to remove the books and papers of the Clerk office from D.S. Byrd back to Gainesville, and that warrant issue."

The county records had evidently been deposited for safe keeping somewhere in the great forest (which) covered almost the whole county.

The circuit court records show the following, (sic) interesting as a peculiar method of designating a date: "Circuit Court, April Term, 1861. The State of Mississippi.

At a regular term of the Circuit court begun and held in and for the County of Hancock in the State of Mississippi on the first Monday after the fourth Monday April A.D., 1861, at the court house of said county in the town of Gainesville."

The records then show that no meeting was held for four years. On May 1st., (Monday) 1865, an attempt was made to hold court in Buck Branch., a place in the present territory of Pearl River County, but the judge, John Hancock, failed to appear. Court was dismissed until the next day, when, the judge still being absent, it was finally adjourned by the sheriff. No other

session was held until December 4th., 1865, when the court was able to return to Gainesville in peace, and a considerable amount of business was transacted.

About this time the question as to the transfer of the county seat was evidently being warmly agitated. One of the first indications is in the minutes of the board of Police for Jan. 6th., 1867.

"It is ordered by the Board that a special meeting of the board be holden (sic) at the Court house of said county on Monday, the 14th., day of Jan. inst. 1867, to receive proposals for the building of a jail for this county."

The minutes for the 14th show that:

"The contract for the building a jail for this county was put up at the lowest (?) bidder and struck off to W.J. Poitevent at the sum of Twenty one hundred dollars (\$2100.00) he being the lowest and best bidder."

This is the first record of a county jail. Although there is an authorization during the war for the sheriff to sell the jail irons at auction. The reason for the sale is not given. If a jail were actually built in Gainesville it would, of course, be an argument against removing the county seat.

In 1867 an act of the state legislature authorized an election to determine the future county seat. Again we lack any account except the dry facts in official records, but we can imagine a very intense rivalry.

The minutes of the board of Police for a special March term in 1867 show the following:

"Whereas at an election held at the various precincts of

Hancock County of the 3rd Monday, 18th day of March 1867, under recent act of the Legislature of the State of Mississippi for the county seat of justice of said county, and it appearing further to the satisfaction of the Board that Gainesville retained (?) the highest number of votes for the said seat of Justice.

"It is therefore ordered by the Board that the said town of Gainesville be and is this date declared the seat of Justice of this county."

The county board, obviously partisan in the matter, did not have the last word, as shown by records of the circuit court for the first Monday after the fourth Monday in April of the same year.

"Board of Police of Hancock County. On motion for pre-emptory (?) mandamus to proceed to provide public buildings and establish the seat of Justice at Shieldsborough.

"It appearing to the satisfaction of the court that the majority of the qualified voters of Hancock county at the election held of the Legislature approved the 16th day of Feb. 1867, were cast for the city of Shieldsborough and that the said defendants sec. Board have hitherto failed and refused to establish the county seat at Shieldsborough.

"It is therefore ordered, adjudged and decreed, and the Court by virtue of the power and authority vested by the constitution and laws of the state of Mississippi does hereby command that the said defendant as such Board of Police to forthwith, proceed to establish the seat of justice of the county in conformity with the choice of the

qualified voters of the same as evinced at said election at the place designated thereby."

The May term of the Police Court was held at Shieldsborough in accordance with the decision above cited, and the following resolution was adopted:

"It appearing to the satisfaction of the Board that the city of Shieldsborough in said county received the majority of the legal votes of said county for the permanent county seat of Justice.

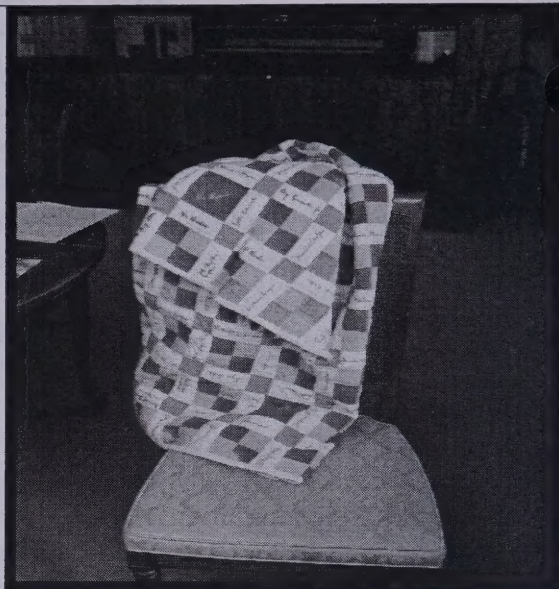
"It is therefore ordered by the Board that the said city of Shieldsborough be and is hereby declared from and after this date the permanent seat of Justice of the county."

We can only guess at the bitterness of the contest that is indicated by these formal records, and at the meaning of the distinction between "the highest number of votes" specified in one resolution and the "Majority of the legal votes" stated in the other. The decision must have been intensely unpleasant for the members of a board that was so evidently in favor of Gainesville.

An act of the state legislature was passed in 1872 authorizing an election on the same subject, but no record is found that anything came of it. Gainesville, which was formerly a busy and prosperous town, manufacturing lumber and shipping cotton from as far away as Columbia, has lost all its business and become a lonesome, unimportant community. Bay St. Louis, formerly Shieldsborough, is a thriving little city and an important summer resort town. It remains the county seat, with no probability of any change.

## MYSTERY OF THE QUILT SOLVED

Remember the quilt that was highlighted in last month's newsletter? Mrs. Marjorie Lynch of 418 Beach Boulevard called and claimed it. She was so happy to know she would get her quilt back, thanks to Terrell Cooke who found the quilt on her great grandfather's property after the hurricane. Terrell's mother says she had to wash it about "twelve" times in order to get it clean. The quilt is on display at the Waveland Market until the owner claims it at the end of June.



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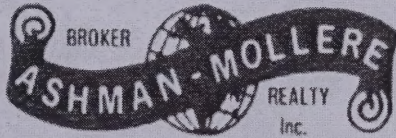
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## MONTHLY TOURS & TRIPS

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July 5th - McGee's Castle, MS—\$79 (total cost)  
August 2nd — Mobile Dog Races—\$22 (transp. only)

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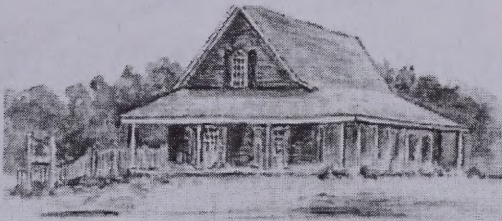
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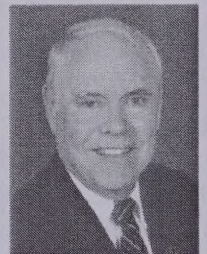
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Charles B. Benvenutti, CPA, PA  
831 Highway 90  
P.O. Box 2639  
Bay St. Louis, MS  
39521-2639

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